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Training the Soviets' Elite Troops

The Soviet special forces, or Spetsnaz, are an anomaly in the Soviet Union: elitists in a collectivist society, encouraged to operate independently and to improvise, instead of following the strict letter of the rules according to Marx. Their generals must envy them at times.

The 30,000 Spetsnaz men and women are "determined, well-trained troops selected for their political reliability, athletic skill and intelligence," according to a secret Pentagon report. Because they are special, they earn more and qualify for retirement earlier; each year as a Spetsnaz equates with 18 months of regular military service.

But unlike the special forces of any country, the Spetsnaz earn their perks. Though they train along with regular army officers, once they are assigned to Spetsnaz units they get training that is probably unequaled in its rigors.

A common training exercise is to parachute small groups in uninhabited regions of the frozen taiga, hundreds or even thousands of miles from their rendezvous point. They spend days or weeks on their own, scrounging food and transport.

Often, special troops from the Interior Ministry are put on the trail of the Spetsnaz trainees—who probably have a better chance than most Russians to evade the KGB. An annual three-month exercise in the Kirovograd region of the Ukraine pits the best Spetsnaz units against each other.

Spetsnaz troops risk death during training, which includes the routine use of deadly chemicals, explosive barrages and live ammunition.

According to U.S. intelligence reports, Spetsnaz training includes infiltration techniques;

reconnaissance and target location; survival behind enemy lines; language and customs of target nations, like France or West Germany; clandestine communications; sabotage with explosives, incendiary devices, acids, abrasives and bacteriological weapons; hand-to-hand combat and silent killing methods; skiing, mountain-climbing and rigorous physical conditioning.

Spetsnaz parachute training includes conventional static-line drops; high-altitude, low-opening drops, and high-altitude, high-opening drops with directional chutes that allow the troopers to drift, undetected by radar, for 30 miles or more behind enemy lines. Airborne Spetsnaz units prefer silent, ultra-light planes to glide in on an isolated target. Naval Spetsnaz use mini-submarines.

In addition to rifles, pistols, hand grenades and other standard weaponry, each Spetsnaz unit carries SA7 anti-aircraft missiles. They also are equipped with R350M radios with encryption and burst-transmission capabilities—meaning coded messages are sent in quick, hard-to-detect bursts to a satellite overhead.

Despite reports of Spetsnaz prowess, an Army intelligence officer warned that it would be wrong to consider them an unbeatable force that never makes mistakes. "They are not peasants in leg wrappings," he said. "Neither are they 10 feet tall."

In fact, defectors say the regular Soviet army once one-upped the Spetsnaz. Staging a sneak attack on a nuclear weapons store in the Far Eastern Military District, Spetsnaz troops were humiliated. The alarm sounded and prerigged vehicles shone spotlights on the intruders.